

IPA RESEARCH NOTE

Government-mandated Early Learning Frameworks forcing radical doctrines in childcare

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Key findings

- Under the 'National Quality Framework', Australian childcare services are legally required to follow the government-approved Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for 0-5-year-olds, which is called *Belonging, Being and Becoming*.
- An analysis of *Belonging, Being and Becoming*, reveals that it is based on divisive Critical Social Justice theories such as diversity, inclusion, and equity.
- According to materials recommended by the federal government childcare regulator, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), social justice in early years is an 'exciting' opportunity to explore issues around gender, sexuality, race, culture, and our environment.
- Two new principles— 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Principles' and 'Sustainability'—have been embedded into the EYLF and mean that early learning centres must support 0-5-year-olds to become 'active citizens' in the journey of reconciliation and 'support children's commitment to social justice'.
- Among ACECQA's recommendations are that children perform a daily Acknowledgment of Country and for both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags to be displayed in all settings.

Table 1: Frequency of selected keywords used in the *'Belonging, Being and Becoming' Early Learning Framework*

Keyword	Usage
Diversity (and variations of the word)	91
Equity (and variations of the word)	25
Inclusion (and variations of the word)	17
Total Diversity, equity, and inclusion	149
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	87
Sustainability	35
Identity	32
Critical reflection	24
Cultures	22
Reconciliation	9
Parents	0
Mother	0
Father	0

The early childhood education and care sector

Federal and state governments spend nearly \$15 billion each year on Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC).¹ This includes subsidies, grants, and service delivery. Governments not only fund childcare but are also the policy makers and regulators.

The federal government is responsible for most of the funding to the sector, amounting to \$11.6 billion in 2022-23, according to the Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services 2024*. In 2022-23, state and territory governments spent \$3.2 billion on ECEC, with \$2.6 billion directed to preschool services.²

In 2023, a total of 910,208 children aged between 0 and 5 were enrolled in a federal government Child Care Subsidy-approved service. In total, 1,417,946 children aged between 0 and 12 were in childcare. Nearly half of one-year-olds were enrolled in some form of ECEC.³

According to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, parents are paying up to \$90 per day in out-of-pocket childcare expenses in suburbs in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth, and the ACT.⁴ This means that parents can be paying as much as \$23,000 per annum in out-of-pocket costs, which is comparable with private school fees.

How the early childhood education and care sector is regulated

The National Quality Framework (NQF) is responsible for providing a national approach to regulation and assessment of ECEC. As part of the regulation process, the NQF rates the services based on their quality and compliance. These are called Quality Areas.

Under the NQF, childcare services in Australia are legally required to follow government approved learning frameworks.⁵ The NQF is administered by the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), an agency of the federal government. According to ACECQA, under section 168 of the National Law, approved providers must:

ensure that a program is delivered to all children being educated and cared for by the service that is based on an approved learning framework and is delivered in accordance with that approved learning framework.⁶

In 2023, 89 per cent of Australia's early learning centres met or exceeded the educational program and practice Quality Area.⁷ This means the majority of services complied with the early learning frameworks. In other words, educators appear to be following the frameworks' pedagogy and curriculum.

The current learning frameworks are *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF 2.0) and *My Time Our Place: Framework for School Age Care* (MTOP 2.0).

Both were updated between 2020 and 2023, approved by all education ministers in 2023, and came into effect on 1 February 2024. They are currently mandatory in every state, with the exception of Victoria, which has its own approved learning framework.⁸

Critical social justice in early childhood education and care

Critical social justice is the theory that assumes most human interaction is underpinned by oppressive power structures based on group identities, such as race and gender. The pedagogy is apparent in a number of set perspectives and principles which form the foundations of the early learning framework, and which educators are required to embed into their practices.

ACECQA's agenda is to use early childhood centres to introduce 0- to 5-year-olds to social justice. It recommends material which states that 'when we engage with social justice in the early years, we often seek to explore issues and ideas around gender, sexuality, race, culture, and our environment' and that 'these are significant areas which can be exciting to explore with children...'⁹

ACECQA also supports the notion that 'early childhood is a critical time for children to begin understanding and exploring gender', and that they should ensure that childcare centres are 'safe spaces where LGBTQI+ children and families feel welcomed, honoured, and supported'. Suggestions to educators include 'resisting heteronormative ways of working and ensuring rainbow families are meaningfully included and experience a sense of belonging.'¹⁰

As well as turning classrooms into 'safe spaces', educators are encouraged to decolonise early childhood education. They are to reconsider 'education spaces, which focuses on acknowledging colonisation and its continued impacts, while seeking to disrupt and reconceptualise colonial understandings.' Decolonisation might involve 'critically reflecting on existing curriculum, resources, and practices, and considering whether they serve to sustain or privilege colonial narratives and how they can be reconsidered to make visible Indigenous and First Nations perspectives.'¹¹

Perspectives and principles of 'Belonging, Being and Becoming'

'Belonging, Being and Becoming', the approved learning framework aimed at 0–5-year-olds, is informed by the pedagogy of Critical Social Justice. The framework lists the perspectives and principles that educators are expected to impart to children, and include:

Perspectives

- Ancestral knowledges are ways of knowing and understanding shared through history and culture, in the written, oral, and spiritual traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.
- Critical theories that invite educators to challenge assumptions about curriculum and consider how their decisions may affect children differently.
- Feminist and post-structuralist theories that offer insights into issues of power, equity and social justice in early childhood.
- Find new ways of working fairly, justly, and inclusively.
- Consider the ecosystems in which children live and learn.

Principles

- Secure, respectful, and reciprocal relationships.
- Partnerships.
- Respect for diversity.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives (new in 2024).
- Equity, inclusion and high expectations.
- Sustainability (new in 2024).
- Critical reflection and ongoing professional learning.
- Collaborative leadership and teamwork.

It is important to note that both the 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives' and 'Sustainability' principles are new additions to the current early learning frameworks.

1. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Perspectives

This principle, and its resulting practices, are embedded throughout the learning framework. The main rationale for the addition to the framework is that early learning should be the vehicle through which children aged between 0-5 become active citizens in the journey of reconciliation.

The document states that 'early childhood education has a critical role to play in delivering this outcome and advancing Reconciliation in Australia.'¹² It is expected that educators should not only recognise that 'diversity contributes to the richness of our society and provides a valid evidence base about ways of knowing' but also that 'for Australian children it also includes promoting greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being and actively working towards Reconciliation.'¹³

Educators are advised that they should work with Reconciliation Australia in developing their own, fit for purpose Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP) because they are the 'crucial link between the rhetoric of Reconciliation and the reality of the vision fulfilled'.¹⁴

This principle is embedded into the planning and implementation of curriculum as well as the educators' 'philosophy and practice' as a 'key tool to advance Reconciliation.' Suggestions include 'Acknowledging Country daily by focusing on the history that children have had on this country and relating the history of the land to the experiences of children'¹⁵ and 'visibly and verbally acknowledge connection of language and culture to Country and Traditional Owners'¹⁶ as well to 'display both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags at the setting and discuss their importance for all Australians'.¹⁷

Recommendations are as follows:

Under 2 years:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language through dance and song is incorporated into the daily life of the service.

2–3 years:

- Dream time stories are incorporated into the daily life of the service.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander books, art, resources and artifacts are reflected in the environment for children to engage with and discuss.

3–6 years:

- Children are active citizens in the service's Reconciliation journey and are provided with opportunities to explore Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing, being and belonging.¹⁸

2. Sustainability

It is asserted that Sustainability' requires early learning educators to embed the concept of environmental, social and economic sustainability' in daily routines and practices.

The rationale behind the Sustainability principle is that 'humanity and the planet we share with all living things face some big challenges' and as such 'educators and children have important and active roles to play...' It is claimed that 'teaching children about sustainability as multi-dimensional is fundamental to children's learning and development and their role as active and informed citizen'.¹⁹

The notion that children should be ‘active citizens’ as soon as they are conscious is a recurring theme throughout the document. Educators are repeatedly informed that it is their role to ‘assist all children to explore notions of sustainability (social, economic and environmental) where children learn what they do can make a difference’²⁰ and that they should ‘support children’s commitments to social justice and intergenerational equities through curriculum decision making’.²¹

- **Environmental Sustainability.** Educators are told that it is imperative that ‘children become socially responsible and show respect for the environment’. Climate change is seen as a ‘matter of critical concern where children deserve a voice and can make a difference—for example, by exploring ‘weathering-with’ pedagogies which foreground connectedness between children, weather, and the world.’²²
- **Social Sustainability.** Educators are informed that ‘social sustainability addresses issues of social justice and equity, respect for diversity and inclusion, active citizenship and sense of community’ while educators are told that their role is to support ‘children’s commitments to social justice and intergenerational equities through curriculum decision making’.²³
- **Economic Sustainability.** ‘Economic sustainability focuses on fair and equitable access to resources, conserving resources and reducing consumption and waste’. Children are encouraged to ‘become aware and use the 7Rs of sustainability: reduce, reuse, recycle, respect, repair, reflect and refuse as part of economic and environmental sustainability’.²⁴

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End Notes

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| 1. Productivity Commission, <i>Report on Government Services 2024: Early Childhood Education and Care</i> (5 February 2024) Part B, Section 3. | (5 February 2024) Part B, Section 3, Table 3A.30. | 17. Ibid, 32. |
| 2. Ibid. | 8. Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (2016). | 18. ACECQA, ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming: Aboriginal Perspectives’ (Information Sheet, June 2023) 2. |
| 3. Ibid. | 9. Madeleine Dobson, ‘Social justice in early education’ (The Education Hub, 2022). | 19. ACECQA, ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming: Sustainability’ (Information Sheet, June 2023). |
| 4. Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, <i>Childcare Inquiry-final report</i> (December 2023) pp. 13-14. | 10. Ibid. | 20. ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming’ 38. |
| 5. The National Quality Framework (NQF) operates under an applied law system, comprising the <i>Education and Care Services National Law</i> and the Education and Care Services National Regulations. | 11. Ibid. | 21. ACECQA, ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming: Sustainability’ (Information Sheet, June 2023) 2. |
| 6. See Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA), <i>Guide to the National Quality Framework</i> (Last updated February 2024) 383. | 12. ACECQA, ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Learning Framework for Australia (v 2.0, 2022) 4. | 22. Dobson (2022). |
| 7. Productivity Commission, <i>Report on Government Services 2024: Early Childhood Education and Care</i> | 13. Ibid, 16. | 23. ACECQA, ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming: Sustainability’ (Information Sheet, June 2023) 2. |
| | 14. ACECQA, ‘Quality Area 1: Be Part of Reconciliation’ (Information Sheet, February 2018). | 24. Belonging, Being and Becoming’ 40. |
| | 15. Ibid. | |
| | 16. ‘Belonging, Being and Becoming’ 43. | |